

# Guide to using vaginal dilators after pelvic radiotherapy

**The important use of vaginal dilators after your treatment will already have been discussed with you. This leaflet outlines what has been discussed and will serve as a useful reminder. If you have any questions please ask your doctor, nurse or specialist radiographer.**

## Why use vaginal dilators?

The treatment of the vagina with radiotherapy will cause changes to the vagina, including: vaginal scarring (fibrosis), shortening and tightening of the vaginal space (stenosis) and the walls of the vagina may stick together (adhesions). Using vaginal dilators will help keep the vagina supple and flexible, as well as preventing scar tissue developing and adhesions from forming. This will in turn make any internal examinations needed during your treatment and follow up more easy and comfortable. The use of dilators may also help enable you to resume sexual intercourse without discomfort.

## When to use vaginal dilators?

We recommend you start using the dilators 2 weeks after radiotherapy treatment has been completed. This will allow the treatment reaction such as inflammation of the vaginal lining to settle. If you wait too long after completing treatment, scarring may already start to develop so it is important to start as close to 2 weeks post treatment as possible.

The dilators should be used morning and evening for about 5 minutes for the first month and then once a day for the next month. This may then be reduced to 3-4 times per week, thereafter, for a minimum of 6 months. The use of vaginal dilators should become easy and comfortable. If you find dilation becomes uncomfortable, increase the frequency back up to once a day. The use of vaginal dilators long term is recommended. This can be discussed with the doctors at your check up after treatment. If you resume regular sexual intercourse, this will have the same effect on the vagina as using the dilators so the frequency of use may be reduced, providing intercourse is easy and comfortable. A vibrator will also have the same effect as the vaginal dilators if you feel more comfortable using this method.

## How to use vaginal dilators?

Dilators are plastic, tampon shaped cones that come in four sizes. Attach the dilators together as shown in the picture opposite. Each cone has two ends. One end will be inserted into the vagina; the opposite end can be used as a handle. As your vagina may be drier after radiotherapy, apply a little lubricant, such as Optilube or any water-based lubricant to the end of the dilator and the entrance of your vagina. Find a comfortable position and when relaxed, gently insert the smallest dilator into your vagina. If this is easy and comfortable, progress up to the next size. The aim is to use the largest size as soon as possible and then continue with this.



*Left: cone size 3 and 4  
Right: cone size 1 and 2*

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You will feel when it has reached the top of the vagina. Place a little pressure but no force on the dilator, and then, using a rotating motion, massage and stretch the muscles of the whole length of the vagina. Continue this motion for about 5 minutes and then withdraw the dilator while still rotating it and remove it from the vagina.

### **Positions to adopt when using vaginal dilators**

Make sure you are in a comfortable and private place when using the dilators as it is important that you are relaxed. The easiest position to adopt is to lie on your back on your bed, bend your knees and allow your knees to fall apart. If preferred, it can be done in the shower or bath but ensure that bubble bath or other toiletries are not used in the bath water as this may cause irritation of the lining of the vagina. The warm water may help the pelvic muscle relax and act as a lubricant.

Alternatively, stand with one foot on the ground and the other raised on the side of the bed or bath, with the knee bent, to allow easy insertion of the dilator.

### **Cleaning the vaginal dilators**

Any dilators that have been used, including the handle, will need thorough cleaning after each use. The best method is to wash all parts

in hot water with a mild soap. Using a clean toothbrush to help clean the cones inside and out will ensure all the lubricating gel is removed and stop any bacteria building up. Rinse thoroughly under running water, drain and allow the cone and handle to dry fully before storing them.

Sterilising them at home is not necessary but washing after each use is essential to maintain cleanliness and hygiene. Please do not let anyone else use your dilators as this could cause cross infection.

### **What are the side effects of using dilators?**

You may experience mild discomfort when first using the dilators; this should not be too painful. It is possible that you may experience spotting or slight bleeding following use of the dilators. This is due to the scar tissue in the vaginal walls being broken down. If bleeding becomes excessive, or if you have a heavy, discoloured, bad smelling vaginal discharge, please contact a member of staff in the Radiotherapy Department, your doctor or the clinical nurse specialist straight away. These are available 9am-5pm Mon-Fri. Outside of these times, contact your GP.

### **Contact details.**

If you have more questions about your dilators, please phone:

Lisa Clarke (Clinical Nurse Specialist): 0118 322 8195

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Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Lisa Revans, Berkshire Cancer Centre, April 2021. Next review due: April 2023

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